

Psalm 22 The Psalm of the cross

Usually my starting point with a psalm would be to look at what the writer was saying about his own situation; however, psalm 22 so clearly foreshadows the sufferings of Jesus that I would like to start by reflecting on the events of Good Friday.

Jesus had been arrested the previous night and kept under guard. At dawn the Jewish council tried him and found him guilty of blasphemy. They took him to Pilate and after some unexpected delays secured the death sentence which they were so desperate for. Pilate pronounced sentence and Jesus was led through the streets of the city and up to Golgotha, the place of execution, stumbling under the weight of the cross-beam of his cross which he was forced to carry.

What was he thinking of? He seems to have been thinking of other people.

As he saw the women following him in tears he said:

“Do not weep for me; weep for yourselves and for your children” (Luke 23:28-31) and he told them of the terrible days to come when Jerusalem would fall to the Romans.

As the soldiers drove those huge nails through his wrists and ankles to fix him to the cross he said:

“Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” (Luke 23:34) The one who had preached forgiveness during his life practised it in his death.

There were 3 crosses on that hillside when Jesus was crucified. To begin with the other 2 heaped abuse on Jesus, but then one of them had a change of heart and realised that there was something different about Jesus, because he did not deserve to die. So he turned to Jesus and said

“Remember me when you come in your kingdom.”

Jesus said to him:

“I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise.” (Luke 23:43)

He entrusted his mother to the care of the apostle John, saying:

“Dear woman, here is your son”, and to John: *“Here is your mother”*. (John 19:26-27)

In none of these things did Jesus appear to be thinking of himself at all. He was thinking entirely of others.

This changed at noon. At noon a great **darkness** came down which lasted until 3 o’clock. It was as if God had shut the doors of heaven upon Jesus so that what happened during those 3 hours was between him and Jesus alone.

What was Jesus thinking of during these 3 hours?

There is no reason why we should dare to ask, but the Bible gives us 3 important clues.

First, at the start of the 3 hours of darkness, Jesus suddenly cried out:

“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matthew 27:46). These are the opening words of psalm 22.

Secondly, John tells us that Jesus, knowing that all was now completed and so that the Scripture might be fulfilled, said, *“I am thirsty.”* And the soldiers gave him wine vinegar on a sponge. The words *“I am thirsty”* can only come from Psalm 69, a psalm very similar to Psalm 22.

Thirdly, just before he died, Jesus called out: *“It is finished”* (John 19:30). This is a quotation from the last verse of Psalm 22 which in our version reads: *“He has done it”*, but could equally well read *“It is finished”*. Putting this together, we can see that Jesus in his suffering was meditating on the Hebrew Scriptures, the Scriptures which he had learned and loved and taught during his life. And clearly he saw his crucifixion as a fulfilment of Psalm 22.

Psalm 22 begins with a foreshadowing of Christ being alienated from his Father as he took our sin upon himself; it continues with a detailed description of a crucifixion; and it ends in triumph as the suffering one tells how he

was heard and how he will praise God in the great assembly. As Jesus said these words “*It is finished*” or “*He has done it*”, he was not dying in despair as some theologians who ought to know better would have us believe. He died knowing that God had heard his cry and that “*all the ends of the earth would remember and turn to the Lord.*”

Let us look in more detail at this remarkable Psalm which splits clearly into 2 parts.

The first 21 verses are a description of suffering. Three times the sufferings are described and 3 times the sufferer turns to God in prayer.

The cry of forsakenness (1, 2)

“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

The suffering one cries out to God, believing that God has forsaken him, asking why he has been forsaken but receiving no reply.

During his life Jesus had had such an intimate relationship with his Father. God had affirmed and approved him with the words “*This is my*

son whom I love; with him I am well pleased.” (Matthew 3:17)

But now, in his hour of extreme need, God had abandoned him. The agony which Christ suffered was more than physical torture, public humiliation and painful death. It was the torment of separation from God.

The idea that Jesus could be forsaken by God is so disturbing that many people have tried to explain it away.

Some have said that Jesus was simply calling attention to what the psalm describes.

Others have said that Jesus only felt forsaken when in fact he was not. In the final outcome of course he was not. That is what the psalm as a whole shows. Besides, we know that the cross was followed by the resurrection.

However, if we take the teaching of the Bible as a whole, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that Jesus was in fact forsaken by God the Father while he bore the sin of his people on the cross. This is the very heart of the gospel, that Jesus took our hell so that we

might share his heaven; that God's love for us was so great that he gave his only son; that Jesus' love for us was so great that he gave his life as a ransom for many people.

Memory of the past, part one (3-5)

In the midst of suffering we often look back to the past as the psalmist did. How can a good and loving God give us over to such hurt, betrayal and suffering? We remind ourselves that God is holy and faithful and that he responded to our fathers in the past when they called out to him. We wonder why he is not helping us now, but our faith stays alive in the hope that God will deliver us

The mockery of the crucifixion (6-8)

The sufferer moves from his sense of being abandoned by God to the scorn of the people who mock him:

“He trusts in the Lord; let the Lord rescue him. Let him deliver him, since he delights in him.”

These words, and the gestures of these verses, were reproduced precisely at the crucifixion. Remember as we read these words from

Matthew's account of the crucifixion that crosses were set up in places where people would see them; and that the reason for the execution was written on a board above the head of the victim so that everyone would get the message. Above Jesus' head were written the words “This is Jesus the king of the Jews.” *“Those who passed by hurled insults at him, shaking their heads and saying, “You, who are going to destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself! Come down from the cross, if you are the Son of God!” In the same way the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the elders mocked him. “He saved others”, they said, “but he can't save himself! He's the King of Israel! Let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him. He trusts in God. Let God rescue him now if he wants him, for he said, “I am the Son of God”.* (Matthew 27:39-43)

Memory of the past, part two (9-11)

The sufferer turns to God again, this time with memories of how God has been faithful to him.

“From my mother’s womb you have been my God” (10)

He reminds himself that God has been there at his conception, at birth and ever since. So he begs God to help him now in his hour of greatest need when there is no one else to help.

The physical suffering (12-18)

Crucifixion had not been invented at the time this psalm was written, but these verses (12-18) give a vivid description of the suffering of a person on a cross;

There are the threats and mockery of those who gather round to abuse the sufferer – they are like bulls, roaring lions tearing their prey

Then the physical torment is described:

Verse 14 *“all my bones are out of joint”, “My heart has turned to wax”;*

Verse 15 *“my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth, you lay me in the dust of death”*

Verse 16 *“A band of evil men has encircled me, they have pierced my hands and my feet”*

Verse 17 *“I can count all my bones, people stare and gloat over me”*

Verse 18 *“They divide my garments among them and cast lots for my clothing”.*

Even the casting of lots for Jesus’ clothing was fulfilled as he hung on the cross.

Faith still seeks God (19-21)

The psalmist still turns to God as indeed Jesus did. He knows that his own strength has gone, evaporated like the moisture out of a baked clay pot. But still he holds on to God. *“O my strength”*, he says to God, *“Come quickly to help me”*. It is clear that there is no one else to turn to, and it is at this moment of complete dependence on God that we come to the turning-point in the psalm and the whole psalm takes on a different tone.

But before we move on to part two, let us just pause and **meditate** on the wonder of what Christ has done.

Charles Wesley, in what is perhaps his greatest hymn, asks these questions:

*And can it be that I should gain
An interest in the Saviour’s blood?*

Died he for me who caused his pain?

For me, who him to death pursued?

That possibility was so wonderful to Wesley that he composed the entire hymn around it, describing such love as amazing and the death itself as a mystery, beyond even the understanding of the angels. But although he could not exhaust its meaning, he knew that it was indeed for him that Christ died and that his only hope of salvation lay in Christ's death:

Tis mercy all, immense and free;

For O my God it found out me.

The question is, can we all say that it found out me? It is wonderful to know that Jesus died for sinners. As Jesus himself put it:

“The Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.” It's amazing to study a prophetic picture of Christ's suffering like psalm 22. But have you ever got to the point where you can say: “Thank you Jesus for dying for me. I am ready to follow you as my Saviour and Lord”.

We move on to **verses 22-31**. The sufferer has found that God can be trusted even in total

darkness. Now that he has come out into the light he wants to shout God's praises to an ever increasing number of worshippers.

The psalm writer has a great message to proclaim. God has listened to his cry for help and now he wants everyone to know about it. He will declare God's name

- To his brothers (22)
- In the great assembly (25)
- And finally all the ends of the earth will remember and turn to the Lord (27)

His vision includes both the poor and the rich, both his own people and those who live at the furthest ends of the earth, both his own generation and future generations. He foresees a time when *“all the families of the nations will bow down before God”* and acknowledge that *“dominion belongs to the Lord”*. Verses which began as a personal song of praise move out in ever increasing circles until the whole world is caught up in worship.

The original writer of the psalm is celebrating God's deliverance from death; and he has a vision of how the message will spread.

The difference between the psalm writer and our Lord Jesus is that the psalm writer was delivered *from* death but Jesus was delivered *through* death. And the things which the psalm writer saw only dimly and rejoiced over are so much clearer for us as Christian believers today.

Today we can rejoice because, in the words of Psalm 22 "*He has done it*", or as Jesus understood the words at the moment of his death, "*It is finished*". When Jesus died, the work which he came to do was completed, the temple curtain was torn in two and the way back to God was open. The work of salvation is complete; there is nothing we can add to it. Our response, in the words of psalm 22, must be to kneel before him and acknowledge that dominion belongs to the Lord, in other words acknowledge that God is number one both in the world at large and in our own lives.

On one occasion Jesus was approached by a group of people who asked him:

"What must we do to do the works God requires?"

And Jesus replied:

"The work of God is this; to believe in the one he has sent" (John 6:28,29)

The people wanted to know what works would merit God's favour. Jesus tells them that what God is looking for is a life characterised by faith in Jesus.

Psalm 22 also has a tremendous message of comfort for those who have put their trust in Jesus. Our experience still brings us into places where God's presence is hidden and we feel uncertain of his love. The cross and resurrection give us the final answer and assure us that if we trust we will not be disappointed. In his moving account of his battle with terminal cancer, David Watson writes these words:

"William Temple once put it like this:

“There cannot be a God of love”, men say,
“Because if there was, and he looked upon the world, his heart would break.” The Church points to the Cross and says, “It did break.” “It is God who made the world”, men say, “It is he who should bear the load.” The Church points to the cross and says, “He did bear it.”

Although Christ has suffered once for all on the cross for our sins, he still today weeps with those who weep, he feels our pain and enters into our sorrows with his compassionate love.”

It can be helpful in times when we feel that God is distant to work through Psalm 22 and use the psalmist’s words to express our own conflict of faith and work towards our own resolution of faith.

But let’s remember that Jesus alone perfectly fits the words and fulfils their meaning. In his willingness to be forsaken by God, he reversed the power of suffering and death and released a chorus of praise which will reach its grand crescendo when *“the earth will be filled with*

the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.”